

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is perinatal hepatitis B?

Hepatitis (hep-AH-ty-tis) B is the world's most common serious liver infection. It is caused by a virus which attacks the liver and can cause cirrhosis, liver cancer, or liver failure. Hepatitis B can be transmitted from a mother who has hepatitis B to the infant during birth. This is called **perinatal hepatitis B**.

### How is perinatal hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B spreads through blood or other body fluids that contain small amounts of blood of an infected person. People can spread the virus even when they have no symptoms. About 25,000 pregnant women with chronic (long-term) hepatitis B virus (HBV) give birth each year in the United States. Unfortunately, some of these women are not tested and do not know they are infected with HBV— and that they can pass the infection on to their infants during birth or after the baby is born. In other cases, the virus is spread to the baby during close contact with an infected family member, caregiver, or friend.

#### Babies and children can also get hepatitis B in the following ways:

- From bites from an infected person
- By touching open cuts or sores of an infected person
- Through sharing toothbrushes or other personal items used by an infected person
- From food that was chewed (for a baby) by an infected person
- From ear piercing needles that were not cleaned well

HBV is not spread by hugging or shaking hands with an infected person, sitting near an infected person or other casual contact, breathing the same air or from food or water. A woman with HBV who chooses to breastfeed her infant does *not* increase the infant's chance of getting hepatitis B infection.

### Why should pregnant women be concerned about hepatitis B?

HBV can be spread to a baby during childbirth. This can happen during a vaginal delivery or a cesarean-section (C-section). Babies are less able to fight hepatitis B infection than older children or adults. Infants who are infected at birth or during childhood and who are not protected by vaccination have up to a 90% chance of developing life-long chronic infection, which can lead to serious liver disease—or death—even as young as adolescence or as young adults.

### What can be done to prevent perinatal hepatitis B?

All pregnant women should be tested for HBV during the first trimester or at the earliest prenatal visit. Pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) during each pregnancy, even if previously tested or vaccinated. Hepatitis B testing should be done at the time of admission to the hospital for delivery for women who:

- Were not tested earlier in pregnancy
- Participated in injection drug use
- Had more than one sex partner in the previous six months
- Had a hepatitis B-positive sex partner
- Had an evaluation or treatment for a sexually transmitted diseases
- Have clinical hepatitis

Infants born to mothers with HBV will need to receive the hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) shot AND the first dose of the hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. The vaccine is given as 3 or 4 shots, depending upon the brand of vaccine used. After the first shot is given in the hospital, the next shot is usually given at 1-2 months of age. The last shot is given between 6-18 months of age. After infants who were born to hepatitis B-positive mothers have received all doses of hepatitis B vaccine, testing should be done to make sure the child is protected against HBV and that the child has not contracted the disease. This should be done between ages 9 to 18 months.

### **Should all babies receive the hepatitis B vaccine at birth?**

Yes, *all* babies should get the first shot of hepatitis B vaccine before they leave the hospital. This shot acts as a safety net, reducing the risk of getting the disease from moms or family members who may not know they are infected with HBV. Giving the birth dose to all infants can also prevent perinatal transmission when errors in medical testing occur. The vaccine is recommended for all babies so that they will be protected from a serious but preventable disease.

### **Who else should receive the hepatitis B vaccine series?**

Anyone who has not already had hepatitis B illness or has not received the hepatitis B vaccine can get HBV, and should be vaccinated. Those at greatest risk for HBV are:

- People who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- People who have multiple sex partners or a history of a sexually transmitted disease
- Health, dental and emergency care personnel who have contact with blood
- Household and sexual contacts of infected people
- Staff and clients of hemodialysis units and institutions for the developmentally disabled
- Immigrants and adoptees from areas of the world where hepatitis B illness is common

### **Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?**

Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe. The most common side effect is soreness at the injection site or slight fever. Serious side effects are rare.

### **Won't my baby just recover from HBV?**

Babies are not able to fight off hepatitis B as well as adults. About 9 out of 10 babies who get infected in the first year of life will stay infected for life. The good news is that hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccination.

### **Where can I get more information?**

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health  
<http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HBV/index.htm>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

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